

Air Power's Battlespace



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Having spent 10 years flying close air support (CAS) missions in the A-10 Warthog and two years as an air support operations center (ASOC) commander, I've had plenty of experience supporting the Army. Through this experience, I've learned how differently soldiers and airmen view the employment of air power.

On many occasions, Army leaders have asked me to influence the air tasking order (ATO) for dramatic change or coordinate retasking or redirection of sorties—changes requested to ensure their commands or units received specific support. In most cases, time constraints and the planning factors required for retasking and redirecting sorties would not allow the Air Force to satisfy those Army requests.

The Air Force would like to be able to satisfy all Army requests for air—given enough air assets. But employing air power is our job; we must use it to realize mutual supporting requirements

between our components while ensuring a ground commander's air requests are conveyed accurately and expeditiously for consideration in the apportionment process.

Because air power is a limited resource, it must be used effectively to maximize its contribution to the joint force. This becomes especially important to the ground commander when air power is critical to achieving his objectives. Therefore, to use air power most effectively, fire support planners, as well as combat planners from other services, need to understand where and how best to employ air power. This article dis-

cusses what air power's battlespace is, how best to exploit it and how its employment requirements impact fire support planning.

Air Power—What It is and Isn't

Air power can't be a replacement for artillery because it can't lay down responsive barrages of fire or counterfire like artillery can. By the same token, artillery can't replace air, which can strike the enemy anywhere in the joint force commander's area of responsibility (AOR) with a flexible precision not provided by artillery. Put another way, aircraft, unlike artillery, can be called back or adjusted/redirected while in flight to a moving or different target.

Also, fixed-wing strike aircraft can't replace attack helicopters and vice versa. The advantages of fixed-wing aircraft (range, speed and ordnance load) is quite distinct from the helicopter's advantage of excellent responsiveness.

Because air power can strike the enemy anywhere with a wide variety of

mitions, its effects can be an impact at all levels of war. Air Force fighter and bomber assets, therefore, aren't tied to a particular level of war. One day a squadron's mission may be strategic attack, and the next the same squadron's mission may be CAS. Also, theater air is not constrained by boundaries as are surface forces, so ultimately air power's battlespace is the entire joint and combined AOR.

Air Power Effectiveness

We didn't learn how to employ air power overnight; it took two world wars and wars in Korea, Vietnam and the Gulf. We discovered that aircraft historically used for strategic purposes, such as B-52 bombers, also could be effective at the operational or tactical levels of war. B-52s were employed tactically in Vietnam within 1,000 yards of the Marines at Khe Sahn and operationally in the Gulf War at Al-Khafji and against the Iraqi Republican Guard.

The following highlights some of the most prominent lessons we've learned and how each may relate to the responsibilities of fire support elements (FSEs) at the Army echelons.

- *Air power should be controlled by an airman who maintains a broad strategic and (or) theater perspective.* While command and control of air power should be centralized, execution of air missions should be decentralized to promote effective span of control and allow for responsive tactical flexibility.¹ Experiences from World War II highlight the reasons for current doctrine on centralized command and control of air power.

The United States military began the North African campaign with command of its air power divided between the Army Air Corps and organic air power assigned to each surface unit. The decentralized air forces focused on providing an "umbrella" cover over ground troops and were not used where they were needed most—gaining air superiority and interdicting German ground forces and their resupply and reinforcement capabilities. As a result, the Germans gained military strength, and the United States suffered a serious defeat at Kaserine Pass in February 1943.

This defeat forced a reexamination of how air power was controlled and employed. As a consequence, General Carl Spaatz centralized control of American

air power in North Africa, and his immediate success emphasized the importance of a single air commander. The concept of centralized control of air power basically parallels the Army division's having a division artillery for centralized control of its Field Artillery—the structure allows one to make the most effective use of the assets available.

This concept of centralized control of air power was incorporated into Army doctrine in *FM 100-20 Command and Employment of Air Power* published on 21 July 1943. The same basic doctrine is in today's *Air Force Manual (AFM) 1-1 Basic Aerospace Doctrine of the United States Air Force*.²

General Douglas MacArthur also saw the importance of centralized control of air power when he appointed General George Kenney as Air Commander in the Pacific. General Kenney streamlined logistics, accelerated weapons development and devised an air campaign that would support the overall joint theater objectives. Kenney's air campaign was the critical element in MacArthur's island-hopping strategy.³

These examples are "big picture stuff," but the principles they illustrate is the doctrinal foundation for the joint force air component commander (JFACC) to control air power at the joint level. The concept of central control led to the development of the theater air control system (TACS), a subject beyond the scope of this article, but an important system for fire supporters to understand.

The knowledge and professional expertise air liaison officers (ALOs) bring to the ground commanders and their FSEs is key to making the system work. ALOs are trained to assist in fire support planning and provide the expertise necessary to make smart decisions on employing air power. ALOs should be

fully involved in integrating air with the ground commander's fire and maneuver plan and assisting commanders and their staffs in requesting immediate air support to accommodate changing battle requirements.

- *Air power is capable of decisive, simultaneous employment at all levels of war.* The decisiveness of air power gradually became apparent in World War II after the strategic bombing of Germany virtually destroyed its industrial war-making capability and economy before Allied ground forces breached German borders.

Also, conventional bombing nearly assured Japan's unconditional surrender before the atomic bombs were dropped.

"One of the important factors inducing Japan's leaders to accept unconditional surrender was a realization that the Japanese armed forces had lost their ability to protect the people and that under the impact of direct air attack and lowered livelihood their confidence in victory and determination to continue the war were rapidly declining."⁴

Although these are examples of air power's effectiveness at the strategic level, air power can have effects at all levels of war. Unlike ground forces, air power is not bound by terrain, tactics or doctrine to a specific type or level of employment; it uses its foremost inherent characteristic—flexibility—to meet the needs of the entire joint effort.⁵ What this means to FSOs is that air power (with its speed, range and, more importantly, flexibility) can strike targets unreachable by organic fire support and provide reconnaissance and surveillance—e.g., satellites, joint surveillance and target attack radar system (JSTARS) and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)—critical to maneuver and fire support coordination and planning.



B-1 bomber employing conventional weapons. Air power is, essentially, a strategic force.

To the maximum extent possible, air power should be permitted to exercise its inherent characteristics. Flexibility, speed, and range are nullified if fire support coordinating measures (FSCM) are used without consideration for their impact on the theater-wide employment of limited air power resources.

For example, care must be taken when establishing the fire support coordination line (FSCL) because there are significant tradeoffs between close-in and deep FSCLs. A close-in FSCL allows for supporting components, such as air, to execute attacks in a wider area without time-consuming coordination. Deep placement of the FSCL provides maneuver area for ground forces in rapidly advancing, offensive situations. This deep placement of the FSCL may impose unacceptable limitations on the air component's ability to support operations short of the FSCL due to the requirement for increased coordination and tighter, positive control.

The joint force land component commander (JFLCC) should optimize placement of the FSCL so it doesn't inhibit the ground force operational tempo and reduces the possibility of fratricide while making the most of all organic and supporting component assets. Fundamentally, FSCL placement is situational and may be changed as required to maximize the success of the campaign.⁶

The JFACC must be notified of pending FSCL changes as soon as possible. Anticipated changes should be communicated from the JFLCC's staff through the battlefield coordination detachment (BCD) to the joint air operations center (JAOC). (Until recently, the BCD was called the battlefield coordination element, or BCE.) Timely notification of FSCL changes (six to eight hours before execution) will allow for coordination with the JFACC for uninterrupted air operations.

One technique to facilitate notification is to develop preplanned FSCLs that are established "on-order" and work like movement phase lines. The advantage of on-order FSCLs is that it allows the JFLCC the flexibility to rapidly coordinate changes as the tempo of land operations changes.⁷

The bottom line is that inadequate coordination of a FSCL can have disastrous results. One could be fratricide



A-10 Warthog Providing CAS. CAS is an effective offensive tool; it can be a force multiplier for the ground commander.

and another sanctuary for the enemy—neither is acceptable. FSOs and ALOs must understand the importance of proper FSCL placement to help ground commanders make critical FSCL decisions.

• *Whoever controls the air generally enables ground operations.* More commonly called air superiority, this is the first priority of any joint force commander (JFC). Achieving control of the air will enable our surface forces—land or sea—to operate unhindered while protecting our centers of gravity and military forces from air attack. The concept of air superiority parallels the ground commander's emphasis on counterfire as a priority.

This emphasis on gaining air superiority troubles some ground commanders who equate dedicated air support with added security. Rather than have aircraft attack airfields or aircraft factories in the quest for air superiority, they would prefer to have them close by and on-call in case enemy planes appear. Although this preference is understandable, it's unfounded. It would be an unwise use of joint resources to lock air power into a static, defensive role.

This aggressive, offensively oriented air power doctrine has been effective. American troops have not had to fight without air superiority since 1942; the last American ground soldier killed by enemy fixed-wing air attack was in 1953; and our Army has never had to fire a surface-to-air missile at an enemy fixed-

wing aircraft—the aircraft have never been allowed to get that close.⁸

Consequently, when the JFC needs to gain and maintain air superiority, fewer aircraft may be available for CAS and interdiction missions because counterair is first priority. But aircraft performing counterair aren't "lost" assets; they help shape the battlefield and enable friendly operations, both current and future.

Therefore, FSOs should carefully examine organic capabilities to meet fire support needs before submitting pre-planned requests up the Army chain to the BCD at the JAOC. By the same token, the fact that all requests for CAS or interdiction missions may not be filled shouldn't prevent ground commanders and fire supporters from requesting preplanned air support. But they must be aware that the majority of CAS sorties and air interdiction assets supporting maneuver forces will go to the corps or surface unit the JFC designates as the main effort.

• *Air power is best used as an offensive weapon.* This is an enduring principle of employing air power. The combat situation may dictate defensive use of air for close support of surface forces, but success in war is usually gained while on the offensive.

The offense in air warfare is different than in ground warfare because countering attacks in the defense takes more air assets than seizing the initiative and attacking. In air warfare, for any air power to delay an air attack is to risk defeat. An overwhelming initial air strike offers the potential for great impact. This was proven by the devastating effects of air attacks at Pearl Harbor, the Arab-Israeli War of 1967 and Desert Storm.

The minimum requirement for attaining the initiative demands an air force capable of immediate and decisive action at the outbreak of any hostilities. Air warfare won't allow for weeks or months of mobilization; a conflict may be lost before friendly forces can be employed.

Air power can be compared to the Army's operational ground reserve. It can be a shock weapon when concentrated in space and time. But unlike ground reserves, air power can be redirected in a matter of hours to close with the enemy. Thus, more options exist for employing air assets than a ground reserve that may take days to build and commit.